

# Blue Communities Project:

## Frequently Asked Questions



## THE BLUE COMMUNITIES PROJECT



The Blue Communities Project encourages municipalities and Indigenous communities to support the idea of a water commons framework, recognizing that water is a shared resource for all, by passing resolutions that:

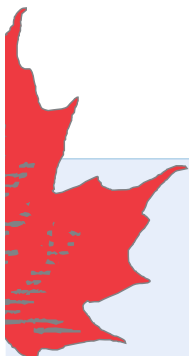
1. Recognize water and sanitation as human rights.
2. Ban or phase out the sale of bottled water in municipal facilities and at municipal events.
3. Promote publicly financed, owned, and operated water and wastewater services.

The Council of Canadians, the Blue Planet Project and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) initiated the Blue Communities Project in 2009. Eau Secours is a partner on the Blue Communities Project in Quebec. The Blue Communities movement has grown internationally with Paris, France, Bern, Switzerland and other municipalities around the world going "blue." Schools, religious communities and faith-based groups have also adopted principles that treat water as a common good that is shared by everyone and is the responsibility of all.

Here are some answers to commonly asked questions about the Blue Communities Project.



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## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT BOTTLED WATER

### **What do municipalities do to raise funds that normally would be generated by bottled water sales?**

Community groups in the Village of Bayfield bought reusable water bottles at \$1.85 per bottle. A municipality could do the same – buy and sell reusable water bottles with the municipality’s logo or “Water is a Human Right” slogans to replace revenue previously obtained through bottled water sales.

### **How do municipalities provide water for municipal events?**

Municipalities like the City of Toronto, Metro Vancouver and Waterloo all have mobile water stations to provide water for municipal events. The Municipality of the District of Lunenburg brings tap water in jugs to events. Ideally, municipalities that become Blue Communities have, or will, install outdoor drinking fountains, or will obtain access to mobile water stations.

### **If we ban bottled water people will buy pop instead and that’s not a healthier choice.**

Alongside the phase out of bottled water, the Blue Communities Project requires that municipalities ensure that people have access to drinking water through drinking water fountains or mobile water stations. The bottled water resolution also requires a municipal staff and public awareness campaign to support the rationale for these changes. Staff are asked to develop an implementation schedule with timelines that include an assessment of access to tap water at municipal facilities. The Blue Communities Project does not make people choose between bottled water or pop, but rather encourages access to tap water.

### **The recycling and environmental issues are similar for pop and bottled water containers. Why is there no call to ban pop or sport drinks?**

The focus of the Blue Communities Project is to challenge the privatization of water and the corporate takeover of water while promoting public water. The organizations working on the Blue Communities Project have raised concerns about the operations of soft drink companies like Coca-Cola and the impacts they have on local watersheds, and share the concerns about the recycling and environmental issues about soft drinks, but these issues are not a focus of this project at this time.



## **How much does it cost to install drinking water fountains? Where can these funds come from?**

The cost of installing drinking water fountains varies depending on the location and suppliers. One community paid roughly \$1,200 to \$1,500 per fountain in addition to installation costs, but costs will vary. In another municipality, city staff did some of the installation work for new water fountains since they had plumbers on staff. In this case, funding was reallocated from existing funds to cover costs. Water fountain costs can also be amortized over many years.

## **Isn't bottled water safer and better than tap water?**

Bottled water companies advertise their products as a safer and healthier alternative as a strategy to persuade people to spend up to 3,000 times what they spend on tap water. However, nothing could be further from the truth. Bottled water is regulated as a food product under the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. Bottling plants are inspected on average only once every three years. Municipalities test their tap water far more frequently depending on the size of the population. The Township of Tiny takes weekly samples to an independent lab for bacteriological testing and inspects each pump station every day, 365 days a year. Greater Victoria tests water treatment plants once a day. Toronto tests its water every six hours.

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS (P3s)**

### **How do I find out if my municipality has a public-private partnership (P3) or other contract with a private water company?**

Contact your municipal labour unions. These unions usually represent the workers who manage and provide the water in your municipality. They will likely know of any private contracts or tenders that exist. You can also ask a friendly municipal councillor, or the municipality's water and wastewater department.

### **The municipality doesn't want to discount the possibility that it may one day wish to enter into a P3 for the delivery of water or wastewater services. Won't this tie the hands of council?**

The Blue Communities resolution is not legally binding. However, if a municipality decides to enter into a P3 it will lose its Blue Communities designation. This resolution is a pledge to public water and will save the municipality money in the long run. It has been well documented that P3s cost municipalities more in the long term.

P3s are projects where the private sector plays a key role in financing, designing, building, operating or even owning facilities or infrastructure that would otherwise be designated public. While the forms of P3s vary, they can allow private corporations to plan, finance build, and operate public facilities – usually at a much higher price than if a municipal government were to retain control.

The 2014 Auditor General Report in Ontario revealed that P3 projects had cost people in Ontario \$8 billion in extra costs. A 2012 study showed that P3s cost on average 16 per cent more than conventionally tendered contracts. P3s result in higher costs for residents, lower quality, and loss of accountability and public control.

### **The municipality already has an amazing publicly owned water and wastewater service system. What's the point of passing the third resolution?**

It's great if your municipality has committed to keeping the water and wastewater service system public. However, there is always the risk the municipality will turn to privatization or P3s. Raising awareness by passing a municipal resolution about P3s will educate and inform residents in advance about the importance of keeping water under community control.

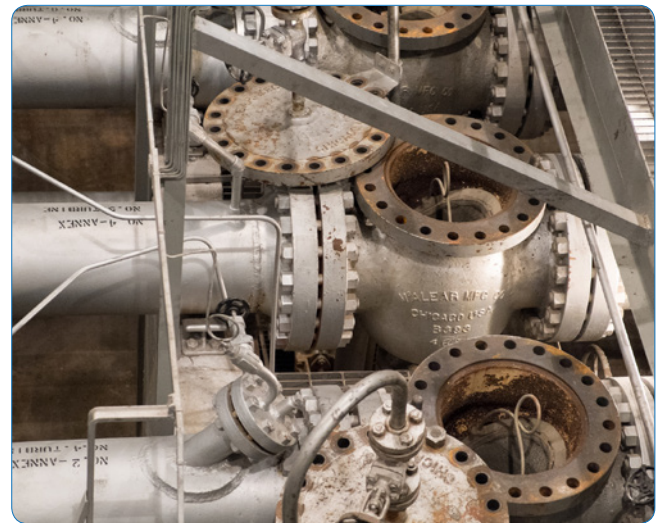
For example, the federal government's new Canada Infrastructure Bank (CIB) will pump more than \$180 billion into infrastructure projects across the country over the next 12 years. The government is allocating this funding to partnerships between municipalities, Indigenous communities, provinces and territories, the CIB and the private sector for water and wastewater systems, schools, transit infrastructure and other types of major projects. Since the government plans to raise the majority of the funding via private investors, concerns have been raised that the CIB will likely lead to the privatization of water and wastewater systems and other public services.

### **A private company runs the municipality's water or wastewater treatment plant. Is the municipality eligible to becoming a Blue Community?**

If a private company runs the municipal water or wastewater system, the municipality is not eligible to become a Blue Community. In order to become a Blue Community, a municipality must pass a resolution promoting publicly financed, owned and operated not-for-profit water and wastewater services. This resolution requires that a municipality oppose privatization in any form of water and wastewater treatment infrastructure and services, including through P3s or short-term service contracts, and resolve to keep these services publicly financed, owned, operated and managed.

However, this is an opportunity to raise awareness with local residents about the risks of private water management and develop a "remunicipalization" campaign aimed at ending private or for-profit control and empowering the municipality and the community to return the service to public control. In 2017, White Rock, B.C. regained ownership of its water utility from EPCOR after local residents demanded to bring it back into public hands.

In the meantime, municipalities can pass the other two resolutions and work on passing the third resolution to become a Blue Community in the future.



"Water Pipes" by David Lee via Flickr. CC-by-sa 2.0

### **Why should municipalities declare water and sanitation as human rights? Isn't that federal or provincial jurisdiction?**

In 2012, Canada recognized the human rights to water and sanitation at the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. However, Canada has yet to develop a plan of action to implement these rights. The UN Human Rights Council has called on governments to take concrete action by developing action plans, establishing monitoring and accountability mechanisms, and ensuring affordable water and wastewater services for everyone. As part of a government's obligation to fulfil this human right, it must adopt measures such as allocating funding to expand public water services and maintain water infrastructure. The Blue Communities Project resolution on the human rights to water and sanitation call on the federal and provincial governments to enshrine these rights in federal and provincial law.



Municipal governments own, operate, and manage municipal water and wastewater services and make decisions on projects that impact the human rights to water and sanitation, including whether to enter into P3s or how to address situations where residents cannot afford to pay their water bills (see below). Municipal pressure on provincial and federal governments is important to hold these levels of government accountable, and to ensure adequate funding is allocated for public water and wastewater services. In this way, municipalities also play an important role in upholding the human rights to water and sanitation.

### **If the municipality cuts off a resident's water when they are in arrears, can the municipality still be a Blue Community?**

If a municipality has a policy that cuts off a resident's water or wastewater services, this would go against the human rights to water and sanitation resolution and the municipality would not be eligible to become a Blue Community. In 2014, UN experts made clear that: "Disconnection of water services because of failure to pay due to lack of means constitutes a violation of the human right to water and other international human rights."

Municipalities may already have different tools to help people pay their bills.

It is a common misconception that residents will not pay their bill unless they are threatened by the possibility of shutoffs.

It's important to work with the municipality to amend its shutoff policy so residents always have water and sanitation services that are affordable, available and safe. Residents have a right to active, free and meaningful participation in decisions that affect their human rights to water and sanitation.

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## **If the municipality passes the human right to water resolution, could it be sued if there is a problem with the water, such as a pipeline rupture?**

Municipal resolutions are a record of decision and can outline a municipality's position on an issue. They can set the course for policy changes and funding allocation on a municipal issue such as water and wastewater systems and water fountains. Municipal resolutions are not legally binding so could not form the basis of a lawsuit against the municipality.

### **GENERAL QUESTIONS**

## **Is it a good idea to get community support before approaching the city through petitions or letters of support?**

Absolutely! The Blue Communities Project was not only created to raise awareness about the importance of water, but to also create a first line of defence against the privatization and commodification of water. Ideally, the Blue Communities Project has widespread community support. Through petitions, letters of support, film screenings or public events, community members can connect with each other about local water issues. These networks become important when a local water issue comes up, such as the privatization of the water or wastewater system, so the community can come together to challenge the corporate takeover of water.

In some cases, municipalities may be willing to become a Blue Community with a simple request or deputation to municipal council. In this scenario, municipal council can demonstrate water leadership by passing the resolutions and raising awareness amongst residents after the resolutions have been passed.

## **What's the difference between the Blue Dot and Blue Communities?**

Blue Dot, an important initiative spearheaded by the David Suzuki Foundation, focuses on a right to a healthy environment, which includes the human right to water. The Blue Dot resolution promotes the rights to clean air, clean water, safe food and access to nature. The Blue Dot resolutions also promote the right to know about pollutants and contaminants released into the local environment and the right to participate in decision-making that will affect the environment.

The Blue Communities Project focuses on challenging the privatization, commodification and corporate control of water. This project promotes water as commons and focuses on the three key water issues of bottled water, the human right to water and sanitation, and keeping water and wastewater services public, community-run and not-for-profit.



The Township of Tiny in south-central Ontario became one of the first Blue Communities in 2011. There are now 30 Blue Communities, Churches and Universities in Canada and around the world.

Helping your community to become a Blue Community is a great way to raise awareness and take action to protect water as a commons. Learn more and download the *Blue Communities Project Guide* at [www.canadians.org/bluecommunities](http://www.canadians.org/bluecommunities)

### We are here to help

If you have any questions or need more information, contact us at [bluecommunities@canadians.org](mailto:bluecommunities@canadians.org), or call us toll-free at 1-800-387-7177.